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Is SALT drive bolstered by Cuba speech?

Troops issue costs Carter pro-treaty momentum on Hill

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Washington

SALT II still has a chance.

And when it comes to re-election, so does Jimmy Carter.

But nearly everyone here agrees that the chances for both now are at least slightly less than they were before Cuba became a test of President Carter's leadership.

It is not that the President's address to the nation Oct. 1 changed the minds of any of the senators who are in favor of the new SALT (strategic arms limitation treaty) or, for that matter, the minds of those who are opposed to it. It apparently did not. The problem for the President is that the flap over Cuba disrupted the momentum the administration seemed to have going for it in favor of SALT among many of the undecided.

The dispute over Soviet troops in Cuba also raised new questions about the President's leadership and command over foreign policy — questions that still linger in the minds of some senators and, apparently, among the public at large.

The President's speech amounted to an attempt to defuse the Cuban issue and to shift national debate back to the new strategic arms-limitation agreement. Behind a screen of words and actions designed to convey decisiveness, Mr. Carter has, in effect, admitted that he allowed the issue of Soviet troops in Cuba to be blown out of proportion.

The President's modest countermeasures in the Caribbean suggest that the United States has more important things to worry about, with SALT II at the top of the list.

Indeed, the President sees SALT as the most important accomplishment of his administration. He contends that the Central Intelligence Agency's performance in detecting Soviet troops in Cuba demonstrates a formidable intelligence-gathering capability and that, in equal measure, US intelligence agencies will be able to detect any significant violations of the new treaty. Rejection of the treaty, he argues, would shake the very foundations of this country.

Mr. Carter also believes that if SALT is rejected, America's allies will be deeply confused and alarmed. An impor-

tant, if understated, part of the President's speech of Oct. 1 was the signal he gave to Western Europe when he said, "Our program for modernizing and strengthening the military forces of the NATO alliance is on track, with the full cooperation of our European allies."

What the President did not say is that the issue of "modernizing" the American nuclear weapons based in Western Europe is an exceedingly touchy one. Not coupled with certainty about SALT, the Western European leaders may have trouble selling it to their constituencies.

And while it is not now in the headlines, it is also an issue that is likely to become hotter. For one thing, the Soviets are beginning to intensify their public attacks on the NATO modernization program, with President Leonid Brezhnev warning Oct. 1 that any attempt to deploy US nuclear missiles in Western Europe with sufficient range to reach Soviet targets would be "playing a dangerous game with fire."

The issue now is regarded as the most important test for the NATO alliance in the coming year. Important decisions are to be made as soon as mid-December.

But one key figure in all this, Frank Church (D) of Idaho, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has until now favored holding the SALT treaty in committee until the Senate could be assured that there were no Soviet combat troops in Cuba.

As a result of President Carter's most recent actions on Cuba and assurances from the Soviets that they do not intend to threaten the US from Cuba or apparently add to what the US considers to be a combat brigade there, Senator Church is prepared to move ahead with SALT. But he still attaches one important reservation: He says that before the treaty takes effect, the Senate should ask the

President to make a clear statement that Soviet combat forces are no longer deployed in Cuba.

What Senator Church and President Carter obviously are both hoping is that by not pressing the Soviets on this issue now, at some point in the not too distant future the Soviets will quietly — and thus without loss of face — disperse the tanks, artillery, and other equipment that makes its troops in Cuba "combat troops."

But Mr. Carter's critics have been quick to insist that so far the Soviets have yielded nothing to his entreaties on Cuba. And, worse, they say, while Mr. Carter raised in his speech the larger issue of Soviet-backed Cuban military activities elsewhere in the world as a "challenge to our determination," he offered no specific suggestions as to how to respond to that challenge.

The President's only mention of a specific move which might be construed as helping to counter the Cubans outside the Caribbean was his statement that "we have reinforced our naval presence in the Indian Ocean."

Mr. Carter thus left the impression that this was a recent action. But military sources say it actually took place last spring when the US Navy deployed two more destroyers to that ocean, bringing the total number of American ships there to five.